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A PLAIN

ACCOUNT

OF GENUINE

CHRISTIANITY.



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A P L A I N

A C C O U N T, &c.

WE have been long disputing about *Christians*, about *Christianity*, and the *evidence* whereby it is supported. But what do these terms mean? Who is a Christian indeed? What is real, genuine Christianity? And what is the surest and most accessible evidence (if I may so speak) whereby I may know, that it is of God? May the God of the Christians enable me to speak on these heads, in a manner suitable to the importance of them.

Sect. I. 1. I would consider, first, who is a Christian indeed? What does that term properly imply? It has been so long abused, I fear, not only to mean nothing at all, but, what was far worse than nothing, to be a cloak for the vilest hypocrisy, for the grossest abominations and immoralities of every kind, that it is high time to rescue it out of the hands of wretches that are a reproach to human Nature: To shew determinately, what manner of man he is, to whom this name of right belongs.

2. A *Christian* cannot think of the Author of his being, without abasing himself before Him: Without a deep sense of the distance between a worm of earth and Him that sitteth on the circle of the heavens. In his presence he sinks into the dust, knowing himself to be less than nothing in his eye: And being conscious in a manner words cannot express, of his own littleness, ignorance, foolishness. So that he can only cry out, from the fulness of his heart, "O God! What is man! What am I!"

3. He has a continual sense of his dependence on the Parent of Good, for his being, and all the blessings that attend it. To Him he refers ever natural, and every moral endowment, with all that is commonly ascribed either to fortune, or to the wisdom, courage, or merit of the possessor. And hence he acquiesces in whatsoever appears to be his will, not only with patience, but with thankfulness. He willingly resigns all he is, all he has, to his wise and gracious disposal. The ruling temper of his heart, is the most absolute submission, and the tenderest gratitude to his sovereign Benefactor. And this grateful love creates filial fear: An awful reverence toward him, and an earnest care not to give place to any disposition, not to admit an action, word or thought, which might in any degree displease that indulgent Power, to whom he owes his life, breath, and all things.

4. And as he has the strongest affection for the Fountain of all Good, so he has the firmest confidence in Him: A confidence which neither pleasure nor pain, neither life nor death can shake. But yet this, far from creating sloth or indolence, pushes him on to the most vigorous industry. It causes him to put forth all his strength, in obeying Him in whom he confides. So that he is never faint in his mind, never weary of doing whatever he believes to be his will. And as he knows, the most acceptable worship of God, is to imitate Him he worships, so he is continually labouring to transcribe into himself, all his imitable perfections: In particular, his justice, mercy, and truth, so eminently displayed in all his creatures.

5. Above all, remembering that God is love, he is conformed to the same likeness. He is full of love, to his neighbour: Of universal love; not confined to one sect or party; not restrained to those who agree with him in opinions, or in outward modes of worship; or to those who are allied to him by blood, or recommended by nearness of place. Neither does he love those only that love him, or that are endeared to him by intimacy of acquaintance. But his love resembles that of Him whose mercy is over all his works. It soars

soars above all these scanty bounds; embracing neighbours and strangers, friends and enemies: Yea, not only the good and gentle, but also the froward; the evil and unthankful. For he loves every soul that God has made; every child of man, of whatever place or nation. And yet this universal benevolence does in no wise interfere with a peculiar regard for his relations, friends and benefactors: A fervent love for his country; and the most indear'd affection to all men of integrity, of clear and generous virtue.

6. His love, as to these, so to all mankind, is itself generous and disinterested; springing from no view of advantage to himself, from no regard to profit or praise; no, nor even the pleasure of loving. This is the daughter not the parent of his affection. By experience he knows, that *social love* (if it mean the love of our neighbour) is absolutely, essentially different from *self-love*, even of the most allowable kind. And yet it is sure, that, if they are under due regulations, each will give additional force to the other, 'till they mix together never to be divided.

7. And this universal, disinterested love, is productive of all right affections. It is fruitful of gentleness, tenderness, sweetness; of humanity, courtesy, and affability. It makes a Christian rejoice in the virtues of all, and bear a part in their happiness; at the same time that he sympathizes with their pains, and compassionates their infirmities. It creates modesty, condescension, prudence, together with calmness and evenness of temper. It is the parent of generosity, openness, and frankness, void of jealousy and suspicion. It begets candour, and willingness to believe and hope whatever is kind and friendly of every man: And invincible patience, never overcome of evil, but overcoming evil with good.

8. The same love constrains him to converse, not only with a strict regard to truth, but with artless sincerity and genuine simplicity, as one in whom there is no guile. And not content with abstaining from all such expressions as are contrary to justice or truth, he endeavours to refrain from every unloving word, either

to a present or of an absent person: In all his conversation aiming at this, either to improve himself in knowledge or virtue, or to make those with whom he converses some way wiser, or better, or happier than they were before.

9. The same love is productive of all right actions. It leads him into an earnest and steady discharge of all social offices, of whatever is due to relations of every kind; to his Friends, to his country, and to any particular community whereof he is a member. It prevents his willingly hurting or grieving any man. It guides him into an uniform practice of justice and mercy, equally extensive with the principle whence it flows. It constrains him to do all possible good, of every possible kind, to all men: And makes him invariably resolv'd, in every circumstance of life to do that, and that only, to others, which supposing he were himself in the same situation, he would desire they should do to him.

10. And as he is easy to others, so he is easy in himself. He is free from the painful swellings of pride, from the flames of anger, from the impetuous gusts of irregular self-will. He is no longer tortured with envy or malice, or with unreasonable and hurtful desire. He is no more enslaved to the pleasures of sense, but has the full power both over his mind and body, in a continued chearful course of sobriety, of temperance and chastity. He knows how to use all things in their place, and yet is superior to them all. He stands above those low pleasures of Imagination, which captivate vulgar minds, whether arising from what mortals term greatness or novelty, or beauty. All these too he can taste, and still look upward; still aspire to nobler enjoyments. Neither is he a slave to fame: Popular breath affects not him; he stands steady, and collected in himself.

11. And he who seeks no praise, cannot fear dispraise. Censure gives him no uneasiness; being conscious to himself, that he would not willingly offend, and that he has the approbation of the LORD of all. He cannot fear want; knowing in whose hand is the earth and the fulness thereof, and that it is impossible for him to withhold from one that fears him any man-

ner of thing that is good. He cannot fear pain, knowing it will never be sent, unless it be for his real advantage; and that then his strength will be proportioned to it, as it has always been in times past. He cannot fear death being able to trust Him he loves, with his soul as well as his body; yea, glad to leave the corruptable body in the dust, till it is raised incorruptible and immortal. So that in honour or shame, in abundance or want, in ease or pain, in life or death, always and in all things he has learned to be content, to be easy, thankful, joyful, happy.

12. He is happy in knowing there is a God, an intelligent cause and Lord of all, and that He is not the produce either of blind chance or inexorable necessity. He is happy in the full assurance he has, that this Creator and End of all Things, is a Being of boundless wisdom, of infinite power to execute all the designs of his wisdom, and of no less infinite goodness to direct all his power to the advantage of all his creatures. Nay, even the consideration of his immutable justice, rendering to all their due, of his unspotted holiness, of his all-sufficiency in Himself, and of that immense ocean of all perfections, which center in God from eternity to eternity, is a continual addition to the happiness of a Christian.

13. A farther addition is made thereto, while, in contemplating even the Things that surround Him, that thought strikes warmly upon his heart:

"These are thy glorious works, Parent of good."

While he takes knowledge of the invisible things of GOD, even his eternal power and wisdom, in the things that are seen, the heavens, the earth, the fowls of the air, the lillies of the field. How much more, while, rejoicing in the constant care which He still takes of the work of his own hand he breaks out, in a transport of love and praise, "O LORD, our governor! How excellent is thy name in all the earth! Thou that hast set thy glory above the heavens!" While he, as it were sees the LORD sitting upon his throne, and ruling all things well: While he observes the general providence of GOD co-extended with his whole creation, and surveys all the effects of it in the heavens and earth, as a well

well pleased spectator; while he sees the wisdom and goodness of his general government descending to every particular; so presiding over the whole universe, as over a single person; so watching over every single person, as if he were the whole universe: How does he exult, when he reviews the various traces of the almighty goodness, in what has befallen himself, in the several circumstances and changes of his own life! All which, he now sees, have been allotted to him and dealt out, in number, weight, and measure. With what triumph of soul, in surveying either the general or particular providence of God, does he observe every line pointing out an hereafter, every scene opening into eternity!

14. He is peculiarly and inexpressibly happy, in the clearest and fullest conviction, "This all powerful, all wise, all gracious Being, this Governour of all, loves *me*. This lover of my soul is always with me, is never absent, no not for a moment. And I love Him; there is none in heaven but Thee, none on earth that I desire beside Thee! And He has given me to resemble Himself. He has stamp'd his Image on my Heart. And I live unto Him; I do only his will; I glorify Him with my body and my spirit. And it will not be long before I shall die unto Him; I shall die into the arms of God. And then farewell sin and pain; then it only remains, that I should live with Him for ever."

15. This is the plain, naked portraiture of a Christian; be not prejudiced against him for his name. Forgive his particularities of opinion, and (what you think) superstitious modes of worship. These are circumstances but of small concern; and do not enter into the essence of his character. Cover them with a veil of love, and look at the substance; his tempers, his holiness, his happiness,

Can calm reason conceive either a more amiable or a more desirable character?

Is it your own? Away with names! Away with opinions! I care not what you are called. I ask not (it does not deserve a thought) what opinion you are of; so you are conscious to yourself, that you are the man, whom I have been (however faintly) describing.

Do

Do not you know, you ought to be such? Is the Governor of the world well pleased that you are not?

Do you (at least) desire it? I would to God that desire may penetrate your inmost soul; and that you may have no rest in your spirit, 'till you are not only almost but altogether a Christian!

Sect. II. 1. The second point to be considered is, What is real genuine Christianity? Whether we speak of it as a principle in the soul, or as a scheme or system of doctrine.

Christianity, taken in the latter sense, is, that system of doctrine, which describes the character above recited; which promises, It shall be mine, (provided I will not rest 'till I attain) and which tells me, how I may attain it.

2. First, it *describes* this character in all its parts, and that in the most lively and affecting manner. The main lines of this picture are beautifully drawn in many passages of the Old Testament. These are filled up in the New, retouch'd and finished with all the art of God.

The same we have in miniature more than once: Particularly in the thirteenth chapter of the former epistle to the *Corinthians*, and in that discourse which St. Matthew records as delivered by our Lord, at his entrance upon his publick ministry.

3. Secondly, Christianity *promises*, this character shall be mine, if I will not rest 'till I attain it. This is promised both in the Old Testament and the New. Indeed the New is, in effect, all a promise: Seeing every description of the servants of God mentioned therein, has the nature of a command; in consequence of those general injunctions, *a Be ye followers of me, as I am of Christ: b Be ye followers of them, who through faith and patience inherit the Promises.* And every command has the force of a promise; in virtue of those general promises; *c A new heart will I give you, and I will put my spirit within you; and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments and do them. d This is the covenant that I will make after those days,*
saith

a 1 Cor. xi. 1. *b* Heb. vi. 12. *c* Ezek. xxxvi. 26, 27.

d Heb. viii. 10.

saith the LORD, I will put my laws into their minds and write them in their hearts. Accordingly, when it is said, *° Thou shalt love the LORD thy GOD, with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind*; it is not only a direction, what I shall do; but a promise of what GOD will do in me: Exactly equivalent with what is written elsewhere, *† The LORD thy GOD will circumcise thy heart and the heart of thy seed* (alluding to the custom then in use) *to love the LORD thy GOD with all thine heart and with all thy soul.*

4. This being observ'd, it will readily appear to every serious person, who reads the New Testament with that care, which the importance of the subject demands, That every particular branch of the preceding character is manifestly promised therein: Either explicitly, under the very form of a promise, or virtually, under that of a description or command.

5. Christianity tells me, in the third place, how I may attain the promise, namely, by faith.

But what is Faith? Not an opinion, no more than it is a form of words: Not any number of opinions put together, be they ever so true. A string of opinions is no more Christian Faith, than a string of beads is Christian holiness.

It is not an assent to any opinion, or any number of opinions. A man may assent to three, or three and twenty Creeds: He may assent to all the Old and New Testament (at least as far as he understands them) and yet have no Christian faith at all.

6. The Faith by which the promise is attained, is represented by Christianity, as a power wrought by the Almighty in an immortal Spirit, inhabiting an house of clay, to see thro' that veil into the world of spirits, into things invisible and eternal: A power to discern those things which with eyes of flesh and blood no man hath seen or can see: Either by reason of their nature, which (tho' they surround us on every side) is not perceivable, by these gross senses: Or by reason of their distance, as being yet afar off, in the bosom of eternity.

7. This

° Matt. xxii. 37. † Deut. xxx. 6.

7. This is Christian faith in the general notion of it. In its more particular notion it is, a divine evidence or conviction wrought in my heart, that God is reconciled to *me* through his Son: Inseparably joined with a confidence in Him, as a gracious, reconciled father, as for all things, so especially for all those good things which are invisible and eternal.

To believe (in the Christian sense) is then, to walk in the light of eternity: And to have a clear sight of, and confidence in the Most High, reconciled to me, through the Son of his love.

8. Now how highly desirable is such a faith, were it only on its own account? For how little does the wisest of men know, of any thing more than he can see with his eyes? What clouds and darkness cover the whole scene of things invisible and eternal? What does he know even of himself, as to his invisible part? What of his future manner of existence? How melancholy an account does the prying learned Philosopher, (perhaps the wisest and best of all Heathens) the great, the venerable *Marcus Antoninus* give of these things? What was the result of all his serious researches? Of his high and deep contemplations? "Either dissipation (of the soul as well as the body, into the common, unthinking mass) or re-absorption into the universal fire, the unintelligent source of all things: Or, some unknown manner of conscious existence, after the body sinks to rise no more." One of these three he supposed must succeed death; but which he had no light to determine. Poor *Antoninus*! With all his Wealth, his honour, his power with all his wisdom and philosophy!

"What points of knowledge did he gain?"

That life is sacred all—and vain!

Sacred how high? And vain how low?

He could not tell—But died to know."

9. He died to know! And so must you; unless you are now a partaker of Christian faith. O consider this. Nay, and consider, not only how little you know of the immensity of the things that are beyond sense and time, but how uncertainly do you know even that little? How faintly glimmering a light is that you have?

Can

Can you properly be said, to *know* any of these things? Is that knowledge any more than bare conjecture? And the reason is plain. You have no senses suited to invisible or eternal objects. What *desiderata* then, especially to the rational, the reflecting part of mankind are these? A more extensive knowledge of things invisible and eternal: A greater certainty in whatever knowledge of them we have: And, in order to both, faculties capable of discerning things invisible.

10. Is it not so? Let impartial reason speak. Does not every thinking man want a window, not so much in his neighbour's, as in his own breast? He wants an opening there, of whatever kind, that might let in light from eternity. He is painted to be thus feeling after God, so darkly, so uncertainly: To know so little of God, and indeed so little of any beside material objects. He is concerned, that he must see even that little, not directly, but in the dim, sullied glass of sense: And consequently so imperfectly and obscurely, that it is all a mere *ænigma* still.

11. Now these very *desiderata* faith supplies. It gives a more extensive knowledge of things invisible, shewing what eye had not seen, nor ear heard, neither could it before enter into our heart to conceive. And all these it shews in the clearest light, with the fullest certainty and evidence. For it does not leave us to receive our notices of them, by mere reflection from the dull glass of sense: But resolves a thousand *ænigmas* of the highest concern by giving faculties suited to things invisible. Oh! who would not wish for such a faith, were it only on these accounts? How much more, if by this I may receive the promise, I may attain all that holiness and happiness?

12. So Christianity tells me: And so I find it, may every real Christian say. I now am assured, that these things are so: I experience them in my own breast. What Christianity (considered as a doctrine) promised, is accomplished in my soul. And Christianity, considered, as an inward principle is the completion of all those promises. It is holiness and happiness; the image of God impress on a created spirit: A fountain of peace and love springing up into everlasting life.

Sect. III. 1. And this I conceive to be the strongest evidence of the truth of Christianity. I do not undervalue traditional evidence. Let it have its place and its due honour. It is highly serviceable in its kind, and in its degree. And yet I cannot set it on a level with this.

It is generally supposed, that traditional evidence is weakened by length of time; as it must necessarily pass thro' so many hands, in a continued succession of ages. But no length of time can possibly affect the strength of this internal evidence. It is equally strong, equally new, thro' the course of seventeen hundred years. It passes now, even as it has done from the beginning, directly from God into the believing soul. Do you suppose time will ever dry up this stream? O no, It shall never be cut off.

Labitur & labetur in omne volubilis ævum.

2. Traditional evidence is of an extremely complicated nature, necessarily including so many and so various considerations, that only men of a strong and clear understanding can be sensible of its full force. On the contrary how plain and simple is this? And how level to the lowest capacity? Is not this the sum? "One thing I know: I was blind; but now I see." An argument so plain, that a peasant, a woman, a child may feel its Force.

3. The traditional evidence of Christianity stands as it were a great way off; and therefore altho' it speaks loud and clear, yet makes a less lively impression. It gives us an account of what was transacted long ago, in far distant times as well as places. Whereas the inward evidence is intimately present to all persons, at all times, and in all places. It is nigh thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, if thou believest in the LORD Jesus Christ. *This then is the record, this is the evidence emphatically so called, That God hath given unto u. eternal life: And this life is in his Son.*

4. If then it were possible (which I conceive it is not) to shake the traditional evidence of Christianity, still he that has the internal evidence (and every true believer hath the witness or evidence in himself) would stand firm and unshaken. Still he could say to those who were

striking at the external evidence, "Beat on the Sack of *Anaxagoras*." But you can no more hurt *my* evidence of Christianity, than the tyrant could hurt the spirit of that wise man.

5. I have sometimes been almost inclined to believe, that the wisdom of God has in most later ages, permitted the external evidence of Christianity to be more or less clogged and encumbered, for this very end, that men (of reflection especially) might not altogether rest there, but be constrained to look into themselves also, and attend to the light shining into their hearts.

Nay, it seems (if it be allowed for us to pry so far into the reasons of the divine dispensations) that particularly in this age, God suffers all kinds of objections to be raised against the traditional evidence of Christianity, that men of understanding, tho' unwilling to give it up, yet, at the same time they defend this evidence, may not rest the whole strength of their cause thereon, but seek a deeper and firmer support for it.

6. Without this, I cannot but doubt, whether they can long maintain their cause: Whether, if they do not obey the loud call of God, and lay far more stress, than they have hitherto done, on this internal evidence of Christianity, they will not, one after another, give up the external, and (in heart at least) go over to those whom they are now contending with: so that in a century or two, the people of *England* will be fairly divided into real Deists, and real Christians.

And I apprehend this would be no loss at all, but rather an advantage to the Christian cause: nay, perhaps it would be the speediest, yea, the only effectual way, of bringing all reasonable Deists to be Christians.

7. May I be permitted to speak freely? May I, without offence, ask, of you that are called Christians, What real loss would you sustain, in giving up your present opinion, that the Christian system is of God? Tho' you bear the name, you are not Christians now: You have neither Christian faith nor love. You have no divine evidence of things unseen: you have not entered into the holiest by the blood of *Jesus*. You do not love God with all your heart: neither do you love your neighbour as yourself. You are neither happy

nor holy. You have not learned in every State therewith to be content: to rejoice evermore, even in want, pain, death; and in every thing to give thanks. You are not holy in Heart; superior to pride, to anger, to foolish desires. Neither are you holy in life: you do not walk as *Christ* also walked. Does not the main of *your* Christianity lie in your opinion? decked with a few outward observances? For as to morality, even honest Heathen morality (O let me utter a melancholy Truth) many of those whom you stile Deists, there is reason to fear, have far more of it than you.

8. Go on, Gentlemen, and prosper. Shame these nominal Christians out of that poor superstition which they call Christianity. Reason, rally, laugh them out of their dead, empty forms, void of spirit, of faith, of love. Convince them, that such unmeaning pageantry (for such it manifestly is, if there is nothing in the heart correspondent with the outward shew) is absolutely unworthy, you need not say of God, but even of any man that is endued with common understanding. Shew them, that while they are endeavouring to please God thus, they are only beating the air. Know your time; press on; push your victories, 'till you have conquered all that know not God. And then He, whom neither they nor you know now, shall arise and gird Himself with strength, and go forth in his almighty love, and sweetly conquer you all together.

9. O that the time were come! How do I long for you to be partakers of the exceeding great and precious promises! How am I pained when I hear any of *you* using those silly terms, which the men of form have taught you, calling the mention of the only thing you want, *Cant!* the deepest wisdom, the highest happiness, *Euthusiasm!* What ignorance is this? How extremely despicable would it make you in the eyes of any but a Christian? But he cannot despise you, who loves you as his own soul, who is ready to lay down his life for your sake.

10. Perhaps you will say, "But this internal evidence of Christianity affects only those in whom the promise is fulfilled. It is no evidence to *me*." There

is truth in this objection. It does affect them chiefly : but it does affect them only. It cannot, in the nature of things, be so strong an evidence to others, as it is to them. And yet it may bring a degree of evidence, it may reflect some light on you also.

For, First, You see the beauty and loveliness of Christianity, when it is rightly understood. And you are sure there is nothing to be desired in comparison of it.

Secondly, You know the scripture promises this, and says, it is attained by Faith, and by no other Way.

Thirdly, You see clearly how desirable Christian Faith is, even on account of its own intrinsic value.

Fourthly, You are a witness that the holiness and happiness above described can be attained no other way. The more you have laboured after virtue and happiness, the more convinced you are of this. Thus far then you need not lean upon other men : thus far you have personal experience.

Fifthly, What reasonable assurance can you have of things, whereof you have not personal experience? Suppose the question were, Can the blind be restored to sight? This you have not yourself experienced. How then will you know that such a thing ever was? Can there be an easier or surer way than to talk with one or some number of men who were blind, but are now restored to sight ! They cannot be deceived as to the fact in question ; the nature of the thing leaves no room for this. And if they are honest men (which you may learn from other circumstances) they will not deceive you.

Now transfer this to the case before us ; and those who were blind, but now see, those who were sick many years, but now are healed, those who were miserable, but now are happy, will afford *you* also a very strong evidence of the truth of Christianity ; as strong as can be in the nature of things, 'till you experience it in your own soul. And this, tho' it be allowed they are but plain men, and, in general, of weak understanding ; nay, though some of them should be mistaken in other points, and hold opinions which cannot be defended.